

Mentoring in Teacher Education Programs: Exercises in Power & Interests

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Abstract: Power relationships between mentors and protégés within formal mentoring relationships are largely ignored in research and literature concerning mentoring. The purpose of this research is to expose the imbedded power relationships within a teacher education mentoring program to better understand whose interests were really served by this program.

Introduction

The benefits of mentoring have been described frequently in research studies and literature as enhancing the growth and development of mentors and protégés (Hansman, 2000). Organizations and educational institutions that utilize formal mentoring programs are frequently praised for maximizing their human resources potential. However, despite research that discusses the positive aspects of mentoring, some research has shown mentoring to be not helpful for all protégés, particularly those marginalized because of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation (for example, Hansman, 1999, 2000, 2002; Hite, 1998; Stalker, 1994). In addition, issues of power may affect how protégés and mentors interact and negotiate their relationship, both internally and externally, and ultimately affect the success of formal mentoring programs. Finally, the power held by mentors who are also supervisors to their protégés may affect the quality of the learning that happens within a mentoring relationship.

Due to massive numbers of K-12 teachers retiring and leaving the teaching field, the United States Department of Education projects that record numbers of new teachers will enter K-12 classrooms in the next decade. While training these future teachers, many colleges and universities require student teachers to participate in mentoring programs to further their development as teachers. These mentoring programs typically feature two mentors for each student teacher: academic university supervisors who focus on learning theories, and on-site classroom teachers who focus on “craft” knowledge (Ellinger, 2002). While these types of student teaching mentoring programs are common, there has been little research focusing on how student teachers integrate these two very different understandings of teaching into their own practice of teaching. In addition, while research and descriptions of teacher training mentoring relationships and programs may describe the benefits and “how to’s” of mentoring programs, there is little discussion and in-depth analysis of the power relationships that exist between mentors and protégés within teacher training mentoring programs and how these power relationships may affect learning. In other words, whose needs are met—those of the institutions, the mentors, or the protégés? Thus the problem this research addresses is the gap in the research and literature concerning how power relationships inherent in formal teacher training mentoring programs affect protégés’ learning. The purpose of this research was to

expose the imbedded relationships of power within a mentoring program in order to better understand whose interests were really served by the mentoring program.

Methodology

Interpretive case study methodology (Merriam, 1998) provided the framework to examine the research problem. The case chosen was a student teacher mentoring program, the Urban Teacher Preparation program (UTP), housed in a college of education in a Midwestern urban university. Student teacher protégés within the program were assigned two mentors: a university faculty mentor who taught and/or administrated in the UTP program, and an on-site classroom teacher mentor at the urban high school in which they taught. In essence, this program was composed of mentoring triads, consisting of student teachers, on-site classroom teacher mentors, and university faculty/administrator mentors. Data in this study were collected through interviews with the student teacher protégés, high school classroom teacher mentors, and university faculty/administrative mentors. During interviews, student teacher protégés were asked questions concerning their relationships with university and classroom teacher mentors and about their learning in the program. Student teacher protégés were also asked to describe critical incidents that illustrated their learning to become teachers, critical incidents that illustrated their relationships with their assigned mentors, and issues that both enhanced and impeded their learning to become teachers. High school classroom teacher mentors were interviewed both separately and in focus groups at their high school following interviews with student teacher protégés and asked similar questions to those asked the protégés. University faculty/administrator mentors were interviewed at the urban university last, following the interviews with the student teacher protégés and the on-site classroom teacher mentors. As in the interviews with protégés, both the schoolteacher and the university faculty mentors were asked to relate critical incidents related to learning and other questions about their mentoring relationships. Supplementary data that furthered understanding of the program were gathered from documents related to this program, such as course syllabi, program brochures, and other written communications. These multiple sources of data provided “holistic understanding” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204) of the mentoring program.

Findings

Both acknowledged and unacknowledged issues of power among the university mentors, the protégés, and the classroom mentors caused conflict in these relationships. Several themes that manifested around issues of power emerged: who sits at the planning table, lack of communication, competing concerns, disorganization, and evaluations.

Who Sits at the Planning Table?

None of the classroom teacher mentors who were interviewed had been involved in any meetings to plan the UTP program in the school for the year; as one teacher said “I never was asked anything prior to the start of the program.” Another teacher described his perception of the classroom teachers’ non-participation in the planning of the UTP program as “I think that they (the university) already had a plan, and we were just told about the stages of the plan versus letting us get into creating the plan.” Exclusion of the teachers in the UTP program planning was carried over to decisions concerning which classroom teachers would host a student teacher for

the school year. Although most high school classroom teacher mentors said they were happy to be mentors to student teachers, not all had not been consulted or even asked if they wanted a student teacher prior to the start of the school year in the fall. One teacher, experienced in teaching but new to the particular urban high school that hosted the UTP program, phrased it this way: “Boom—I came on staff here (in the fall) I was told that I’d have a student teacher. . . . I thought wait a minute, I’m new to the building here, I don’t know if I would be a good role model at that point because I didn’t feel like I had enough information. But I was told that I had the years of experience and I was already assigned.”

Despite the perception that they wielded all the power, university faculty mentors felt at the mercy of the high school in finding classroom teacher mentors for their student teacher protégés. Because the high school site was chosen in the late spring before the start of the next school year, there was not much time to meet with classroom teachers about the mentoring program. The UTP program administrator described visiting the high school prior to school ending and putting on “a dog and pony show” about the program to faculty and administrators there. Her description of the matching process between classroom teacher mentors and student teachers unfolded thusly: “We couldn’t really get all the placements perfectly matched, between the mentors and their interns (student teachers), because like school ended, the principal didn’t know if she was going to block scheduling or not, and which teachers were going to transfer to another school and which teachers she was going to have next year.” The haphazard process for matching classroom teachers with student teachers was obviously a source of frustration for university faculty and classroom teacher mentors.

Lack of Communication

The non-involvement of classroom teacher mentors in planning the UTP program by university faculty mentors continued throughout the school year. Although university faculty did call for occasional staff meetings with classroom teacher mentors, these meetings were infrequent. There were also instances when the university faculty mentors arranged an after school meeting with classroom teacher mentors and then failed to show up for the meeting, even though the classroom teacher mentors assembled and waited for the meeting. Classroom teacher mentors discussed this as “a real lack of communication” between the university faculty and the classroom teachers, leading to “rumors and uproar” among the student teacher protégés, classroom teacher mentors, and others involved in the program. Stories of this “lack of communication” were articulated repeatedly in interviews with student teacher protégés and classroom teacher mentors; however, when asked about these incidents, university faculty mentors brushed aside these concerns by complaining about conflicting obligations at the university that caused them to miss meetings.

Competing Concerns

Student protégés discussed the UTP program teaching and the high school models of teaching as being separate yet not equal. Because students knew that their grades for student teaching courses were dependent on the evaluation they received from the university faculty mentors, they would make sure that the lessons they planned for the days they were going to be observed by a university faculty mentor were congruent with the types of lesson plans expected by university faculty. But student teachers realized that their on-site classroom mentor teachers would fill out their own evaluation form concerning their teaching. Thus they felt caught in the conflict between university philosophies of teaching and the day-to-day teaching knowledge of

the classroom teacher mentors. One male student teacher expressed his concerns, saying “it was like as though I was dealing with two different sets of rules. Criteria.” In general, most student teachers acknowledged that they had learned valuable teaching strategies from both university faculty and on-site classroom teacher mentors, but these two styles and strategies were not necessarily congruent. Student teachers seemed to use whatever strategies and styles were similar to that of whoever was observing or evaluating them. They also discussed their own teaching style and techniques as developing in spite of the multiple and competing concerns of trying to satisfy both university and classroom teacher mentors.

Disorganization, Meetings and Conflict

Student teachers were expected to attend high school faculty meetings once a month after the school day at the high school. These meetings were a regular part of the life of high school teachers, so student teacher protégés were told by UTP university faculty mentors that they should always attend them. However, at times, these meetings might conflict with seminars or classes planned at the university; usually the university schedule would be adjusted to accommodate the high school faculty meeting. One day, however, an unexpected high school faculty meeting was announced; even though this meeting conflicted with a class scheduled at the university, student teacher protégés decided as a group that they should attend the high school faculty meeting. Several of the student teachers reported calling the university faculty mentor whose class they would miss and leaving messages on his voicemail explaining the high school faculty meeting conflict. However, the university faculty member never listened to his voice mail. When student teachers arrived at his class late due to their attendance at the high school faculty meeting, “he threw a fit,” as one student teacher described, and he told student teachers that “his class was what was important, not attending a faculty meeting at the high school” and that “they should have gone to class, not the meeting.”

This was not the only critical incident related to conflicts in university class meetings and changing and inconsistent meeting times for university classes. Student teachers relayed other stories concerning traveling to the university campus for classes only to find that class had been canceled. In another instance of “disorganization,” students were told that class was cancelled and then found out later that the university professor had changed her mind and rescheduled class without getting a message to everyone in the student teacher protégé cohort. The professor then expressed her anger in the classroom to the students who did show up for the class meeting. Students attributed this and other similar critical incidents as the “disorganization in the UTP program,” something they felt powerless to manage, address, or resist.

Evaluations

As part of the evaluation plan for student teachers, university faculty mentors were required to evaluate each of the student teachers four times during the semester of their student teaching experience. The evaluation process, as planned by university faculty mentors (without consulting classroom teaching mentors), consisted of a pre-evaluation meeting with the student teacher, observation of the student teacher teaching a lesson, post-teaching meeting between the student teacher, the university faculty mentor, and the classroom teacher mentor (if available), and finally, completion of an evaluation form by the university faculty. High school classroom teacher mentors also were to evaluate their student teachers twice during the semester, using an evaluation form supplied by the university faculty.

The reality of the evaluation process, however, was quite different than the plan. Many of the student teacher protégés reported that they were evaluated only once or twice by university faculty mentors during their student teaching experience. In addition, because of time limitations or scheduling conflicts, student teachers frequently did not have the opportunity to participate in the pre and post evaluation meetings with evaluating university faculty. Student teachers simply received their completed evaluation form from the evaluating university faculty with no explanation of ratings; at times they did not receive their evaluation form until several weeks after they were observed, much too late, as one student said, “to change anything I was doing.” This led to some students being observed and evaluated a second time by university faculty mentors without ever receiving his or her evaluation form or even a verbal evaluation from their first observation. Finally, some students reported preparing for evaluation but not being evaluated because the university faculty mentor did not show up for the evaluation. One classroom teacher mentor said that “at least four times, evaluation was scheduled but no one came” to evaluate his student teacher.

Most classroom teacher mentors and their student teachers reported informal evaluations as something that was performed and discussed between student teacher protégés and classroom mentors much more often than formal evaluations during the semester. However, student teachers and their mentoring classroom teachers expressed concerns about the evaluation of student teachers by their classroom teacher mentors. Classroom teacher mentors were told to evaluate their student teachers and complete evaluation forms supplied by the university twice during the semester; however, formal evaluation forms were not given out consistently to each classroom teacher mentor, nor were they collected by university faculty members once they were completed. Indeed, most classroom teacher mentors felt that they had “no real say” concerning the grade their student teacher received for his or her student teaching experience. Despite their expressed concerns, most of the classroom teacher mentors felt that their evaluation was “the important one” to their classroom teachers since they were with the student teachers every day and knew the day-to-day realities of their protégés’ teaching in the high school.

Discussion

The question of whose interests were served by the UTP program does not have a simple answer, but this research illuminates the power and interests the university faculty/administrator mentors held and used to guide the program by virtue of their position as planners and implementers of the program. Student teachers’ interests, or the interests of the high school classroom teachers, were not clearly represented or acted upon during the planning or implementation of this mentoring program. When viewing this mentoring program from the perspective of Cervero and Wilson’s (1994, 1996) framework of program planning, it is clear that the only interests at the planning table were the university faculty/administrators; the interests of the student teacher protégés and of the high school classroom mentors were not represented at the planning table and thus not heard or acted upon. As Cervero and Wilson (2001) contend, “Systems of power are almost always asymmetrical, privileging some people and disadvantaging others” (pp. 10-11). In the UTP mentoring program, university faculty members used the techniques of ‘lack of communication,’ “disorganization,” and “evaluation” to help control the triangular relationships with their student teacher protégés and the classroom teacher mentors.

Examining how the underlying issues of power that frame teacher training mentoring programs may provide answers concerning how best to plan formal mentoring programs. Power issues within and without mentoring relationships affect mentoring. To ignore these dynamics of power is to misunderstand the internal and external influences of protégés, mentors, and the contexts in which they live and work. The long-range outcome of this research aims to further the articulation of educational theory and practice that will enhance the understanding of mentoring and the power relationships that frequently drive these programs.

Although this research study certainly does not provide a definitive answer concerning how the power mentors hold by virtue of their positions as both mentors and evaluators shape mentoring relationships, the power and privilege of the mentors in this study certainly fashioned the types of learning in which protégés were allowed to engage and thus influenced mentoring practices. Through an examination of how formalized mentoring programs, such as those within educational institutions, are played out in real world practice, adult educators, human resource practitioners, and others involved in planning and implementing formal mentoring programs may gain insights concerning how best to plan these programs to account for power relationships, lifelong learning, and growth and development in adulthood.. This will, in turn enhance understanding of mentoring relationships and the future development and planning of formal mentoring programs in organizations and academic institutions.

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